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ABSTRACT

Participant observation is a classic qualitative methodology in which the researcher is immersed in the particular setting as a participant, rather than an outside observer. In this pilot study of an Even Start program, the methodology was modified by using actual program participants as observers and reporters. This enabled the crossing of certain language and cultural barriers to gather data that would otherwise be difficult to obtain, increased the sense of ownership and community among the adult participants, and increased understanding between staff and participants. It also provided information for program evaluation and change. The Even Start Family Literacy Program is the major family literacy initiative administered by the U.S. Department of Education. This pilot study of the evaluation approach was carried out in Avery County, North Carolina in 2003. In the 2002-2003 year, 31 families were enrolled in the program; 65% were English-as-a-Second-Language families. The adult participants were trained as participant observers for the pilot study, and most chose to participate, interviewing other participants. The most interesting items to emerge from the analysis of the transcripts are the cultural differences between Hispanic and Anglo participants and Hispanic participants and the staff, especially concerning the use of a full-time interpreted. Findings show that the pilot study was successful in capturing cultural identities and many aspects of the program from the viewpoints of staff and participants. (Contains 15 references.) (SLD)

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Even Start Participant Observation Pilot:

Using Qualitative Methodologies to Enhance Evaluations

ED 480 128

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Even Start Participant Observation Pilot:

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Abstract

Although quantitative methodologies are used extensively in evaluation of Even Start programs on the national and state level, research has determined that the results of these evaluations are not utilized by the local projects to improve their programs. In recent years, qualitative methodologies have been promoted as a way of gathering and recording detailed information from local participants of family literacy programs. In order for lessons learned in the classroom to be successfully transferred to the home and community, family literacy programs must reflect the social contexts of the families involved including diversity in culture and language. Participant observation is a classic qualitative methodology whereby the researcher immerses herself in the particular setting as a participant rather than an objective outside observer. In this Even Start pilot study, this methodology was modified by utilizing actual program participants as the observers and reporters. This enabled the crossing of certain language and cultural barriers to gather data that would otherwise be difficult to obtain, increased the sense of ownership and community among the adult participants, and increased understanding between staff and participants. It also provided information for program evaluation and change.

Introduction

The Even Start Family Literacy Program was initiated on a national level in 1988 and is the major family literacy initiative administered by the U.S. Department of Education. Since the program's inception it has been evaluated frequently on a national

level, and each local project is required by law to conduct independent evaluations. In 1996-97, Abt Associates collected a sample of 122 state and local evaluations to determine methodologies utilized and make suggestions for improvements (St. Pierre, Ricciuti, & Creps, 2000). They found that in 76% of the cases, the design consisted of pretesting at the beginning of the year and posttesting at the end of the year. Rarely were results compared with other groups or national Even Start scores. Although this design almost always showed gains among the participants for that year, studies that utilized control groups often showed similar gains in groups that received no intervention (Boser, 2002). Although program gains yield figures necessary for local and state reporting, local projects almost never utilize the data for changing or improving the program. The original vision for Even Start was as a demonstration program that changed as it found new and better ways of delivering family literacy services to each unique local project. St. Pierre, Ricciuti, & Creps, (2000) concluded:

> …if it is useful for project directors to have a local evaluation that concludes that Even Start is a success, then local evaluations can be judged helpful to local projects. However, if the criterion for success is that a local evaluation should be used to help improve an Even Start project, then this review of more than 100 evaluations was not able to show that local studies provide much useful information, either to local project directors, to State Coordinators, or to the Department. (p. 5)

Recommendations suggested to remediate this situation included evaluation budgets that would be large enough to allow evaluations beyond reporting gains in test scores. This would allow more appropriate goal-driven measures to be chosen that would

result in useful interpreted data including recommendations for local programmatic improvements.

This situation was recently revisited in an article by a former Even Start evaluator concerning the different goals of national, state, and local evaluations (Boser, 2002). Many local and state stakeholders feel that the standardized test scores required for reporting fail to adequately capture the progress made in local programs because of the lack of contextual elements. The move to go beyond test scores is evident in many fields of educational assessment. Proponents of cognitive theory argue that learning cannot be effectively reduced to discrete bits of information, but occurs in a larger socially mediated context (Johnson, McDaniel, & Willeke, 2000). These contexts, such as Even Start classrooms, are not static but are construction zones where socialization and learning occur, and contextual cultural identities are formed (Nistler & Maiers, 2000). Each local Even Start program is unique in the variation of participants' characteristics. Some programs are mostly rural, others urban; there are variations in participant's social and economic goals, their skill levels, and even their native language and culture (Neuman, Caperelli & Kee, 1998). Ryan, Geissler, and Knell (1996) concur that different types of evaluation data are essential because evaluation questions are not the same at the local and federal level, and that administrative attempts to mandate practices at the local level through the use of quantitative indicators are usually a mistake. Boser (2002) states:

> In my opinion, local evaluators and state leadership believed that the national evaluation failed to accurately represent the conditions for program implementation, the diversity of programs, the diversity of program participants,

> and the diversity and subtlety of the outcomes of Even Start programs. With funding dependent on how the national evaluation would be viewed by policymakers, this perceived failure to capture and represent program impact could potentially undermine the future of the program. (p.30).

As a solution to this problem, Boser (2002) recommends a participatory, collaborative approach to evaluation. Collaboration involves all stakeholders including participants of the program in the decision making process, such as inviting them to committee meetings, requesting input about the local project to make it more accessible and successful, and involving them in project goal setting. This is similar to Fetterman's (2000) Empowerment Evaluation technique. In some settings, collaboration with adult learners led to a feeling of ownership by the participants, which resulted in contributions such as community outreach, organization of new projects, and teaching group sessions. In other settings, collaboration has also been reported to foster parity between participants and staff, with all stakeholders realizing the abilities, strengths, and skills everyone can bring to the table to forge a successful local project (Tice, 2000).

What collaborative, participatory methods have been used to better illustrate progress at the local levels? Case studies often referred to as family portraits or family portfolios in the family literacy field have been utilized often as a qualitative methodology to capture details of progress made by families in family literacy programs. Qualitative methodology is more likely to capture the nuances of outcomes than more externally determined, quantitatively oriented methodologies. The benefits of this design include more than just greater description of program benefits. Because of the rich detail of these studies, stakeholders such as community members and school personnel may

readily see the progress made, and local support for the program, which is one of the Even Start goals, increased (Boser, 2002). Family portraits also document more than one person's literacy development; they can document family-wide changes in literacy assumptions and attitudes (Hoffman, 1995). However, opponents of the family portfolio method point to the problem of reliable scoring and assessment among multiple raters (Johnson, McDaniel, & Willeke, 2000) and the amount of classroom time required to complete them correctly (Johnson, Willeke, & Steiner, 1998).

In order to provide informative evaluation results at the national, state, and local level, a mixed method approach is recommended to integrate the perspectives of all levels of stakeholders, and inform decision making in both the classroom and the legislature. The traditional test results yielded from utilizing such instruments as the Test of Adult Basic Education (TABE) and Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment System (CASAS) will still be important at the state and national level for quantitative analyses. Integrating a qualitative methodology at the local level of evaluation will yield the detail necessary to describe improvement to local stakeholders and inform program growth and change. It will also reflect the social contexts of the families involved, including diversity in culture and language. Participant observation is a classic qualitative methodology usually considered ethnographic. It has been more recently used to describe educational programs, to focus on professional-client relationships, and as program evaluation. As a participant observer, the researcher immerses herself in the particular setting as a part of that social group rather than an objective outside observer. Advantages of this methodology include collection of data in the participant's own setting and a description of activities and the interpretation of those activities via

interviews (Kurz, 1983). Kurz (1983) also lists ways in which participant observation may be utilized for evaluation: (a) how programs actually operate at the local level, (b) how a program has been implemented, (c) how individuals feel about a program, and (d) how individuals have been changed by a program. By utilizing the actual program participants as the researchers, the methodology contains a culturally sensitive approach that can reveal and capitalize upon the cultural knowledge of the participants that may otherwise stay occluded (Tillman, L. C., 2002). It also overcomes some of the more problematic validity and reliability issues in participant observation methodology which utilize an outside researcher: the presence of the observer altering the behavior of those being studied and outside observer biases (Kurz, 1983).

Methodology

The pilot study was carried out in Avery County, North Carolina in the early part of 2003. The Avery County Even Start program is located at the Cranberry/Freedom Trail Elementary School in Newland, North Carolina and has been in operation since 1998-99. Avery County is a rural, predominantly mountainous county in western North Carolina on the Tennessee border. According to the North Carolina Child Advocacy Institute, in 2001 45% of the children in Avery County participated in the school meals program. The percent of the population with less than a high school education is 29.4% (North Carolina Rural Economic Development Center, Inc.). The Even Start program serves local families with infants through children in third grade and above. The Avery County Even Start project has pioneered some innovative approaches. The preschool children are served together in an early childhood classroom where the older children help the younger ones. Infants are allowed to stay with their mothers during adult

instruction. Both the adult and early childhood classrooms are multicultural with mountain natives and Hispanic immigrants. Transportation, breakfast, and lunch is provided for participants. During the 2002-2003 program year, 31 families were enrolled in the program; 20 (65%) of which were ESL families.

The adult participants were trained for the pilot study on February 6, 2003. Inherent in the participant observer process is the task of unstructured interviewing (Lofland & Lofland, 1995). This involves open-ended questions that arise from the common experience of participation in a particular setting. Topics of the training included interviewing skills such as utilizing open-ended questions, probes, and encouraging elaboration. The trainer interviewed the Even Start director as an example, and then the participants were given a chance to practice generating questions and interviewing each other. A time for questions followed the practice session.

Participants were encouraged to think of themselves as reporters while interviewing, and the study was integrated into the literacy curriculum. Each week, adult participants generated questions that they would like to ask other participants, family members of participants, or staff about the Even Start Program and the impact it has on their lives. The teacher reviewed questions to assure proper format (i.e., open-ended and broad enough to elicit embellishment on the topic), and then the class chose which three questions were to be asked that week. The three adult participants who authored the chosen questions were reporters for that week. Since involvement in the study was entirely voluntary, if the author was unwilling to act as a reporter a willing classmate could take her place. The interviews were done using a tape recorder. Once a question was asked it could not be asked again. It was the teacher's responsibility to keep track of

the questions chosen utilizing a form developed for that purpose. Also, the reporters were rotated so that everyone that wanted to participate had an opportunity to do so. The reporters interviewed at least three willing adult participants, staff members, or participant family members (depending on the nature of the question) a week. As a further incentive, the reporter was compensated for her work utilizing the token economy already in place at the Avery County Even Start program. If the reporter and interviewee's native language was Spanish, the interviews were done in Spanish and later translated for content analysis.

Reporters utilized a specific protocol to ensure uniformity, confidentiality, and proper tracking. First names could be used during the interview, but all participants were assured that no names would be used in the report. This was done for confidentiality and assures frankness of disclosure by the interviewee. All interviews began with the following information spoken into the tape recorder: date, time, reporter name, and interviewee name. The questions were recorded prior to each response. There were no time limits set for the interviews, however the nature of this methodology should lend itself to further questions and discussions on the chosen topic and should also be recorded. On May 22, 2003, there was a pilot debriefing with some of the participants and staff who had participated in the pilot study in order to receive feedback on what went well and what could be changed.

Results

Interviewing was done by the participants during the months of February and March. Most of the interviewers elaborated on their questions during the interviews, and responses were recorded for over 150 questions. Approximately one-third of the

questions were asked by English speaking students and two-thirds by Spanish speaking students. This closely corresponds to the ethnic percentages of the participants in the program. Not all questions were asked to individuals with the same native language; some Hispanic students interviewed English speaking staff, some English speaking participants interviewed Spanish speaking students with the help of the on-site translator. The English speaking students asked more questions of the staff than the Spanish speaking students and asked more questions about recruitment and how to better advertise the program. The Hispanic students asked more questions about the children and how they were taken care of and what other students thought about the teachers.

Because the students were asked to take on the role of a reporter, most of the questions asked were about the program in general or about specific aspects of it. This provided some insight into how participants viewed the program and when interviewing staff, gave them an idea of how things appeared from the staff's perspective. Many of the questions were thoughtful and the answers thorough. For content analysis, the questions asked were separated into eight topics: program participation and goals, specific aspects of the program, recruitment, suggestions for improvements, teachers, children, ESL issues, and staff reflections on how students had changed. These topics are similar to those described by Kurz (1983).

Many of the questions concerned how staff and participants felt about the Even Start program and how it was helpful to their lives and families, and one participant interviewed one of the children about how the program had enabled his mother to help with his homework. Like many Even Start projects, the adult participants have many different goals; some are in the program to get their GED certification, some have their

high school diploma and are attending community college, some want better jobs, and some are there to learn English. Many of the participants reported that they realize it may take time-even years-in order to accomplish their language, educational, and occupational goals. The staff were also questioned about program goals, and it is apparent that the staff supports and encourages individualized goals among the adults. Different aspects of program implementation were also discussed, such as attendance, parenting classes, early childhood classes, GED classes, ESL classes, and computer use. When discussing retention, both the participants and the staff were asked how more people in the community could find out about the program. Participants stated that they would or had recommended the program to friends, and made suggestions for other means of advertisement.

The participants had many positive things to say about the teachers of both the adults and the children. They characterized the teachers as being patient, loving, caring, and consistent with the children. They also expressed affection for the teachers and how they shared not only lessons, but also their lives with them. They spoke of the fun activities that they did in the classroom and the field trips that they took. They also discussed the somewhat unique arrangement of the early childhood classroom in which children of different ages interact together. The Hispanic participants had much to say about the teachers of the adults and the children, including how education differed here from their native country. They shared that the way they were taught to do geometry and mathematics in their native country was different than how they were taught in the United States. They also reported that the teachers in their native countries were not as understanding and helpful as the ones in the Even Start program.

Program improvement is always an important topic for any program evaluation. Participants asked each other and staff for ideas for how the program could be improved. Although some participants did not think there could be any improvements, many gave thoughtful answers to this question. Also, many ideas for improvement were embedded in answers to questions on other topics and included more training on computers, more input from the adults on problems with understanding, and increased hygiene for the children. One issue that repeatedly came up with the Hispanic students in the improvement questions and elsewhere was the need for a full-time interpreter. The staff's comments clearly indicate their belief that having the adult Hispanic students communicate without an interpreter part of the day is beneficial for them and similar to the language immersion techniques utilized with the Hispanic children. The adult Hispanic students however felt that a full-time interpreter in the adult classroom would enable them to learn more quickly by having their questions addressed immediately and by being better able to understand and carry out instructions.

Participants seemed particularly eager to question the staff about the methods used to teach the children. They asked about the different languages used, what the children were learning, what discipline methods were used, their preparation for kindergarten, and what materials were in the classrooms. One particular question addressed how the early childhood teacher felt when adult students questioned or expressed concern about the disciplinary treatment of their children. Judging from staff responses, this apparently arose from specific incidents and involved some misunderstanding of discipline methods utilized, and the issues were reported as having

been resolved. Some of the participants evidently were interested in the staff's perception of the incidents and found the interview a safe way to discuss it.

The final topic concerned questions to staff about the adult participants such as how they related to the ESL students and how they perceived the adult participants to have been changed by the program. These questions captured cross-cultural differences and the closeness that the staff had developed with the participants (Plonski, 2003):

> Interviewer: "I understand that you basically work with Hispanic women. Can you share with us the difference in how you work with Hispanic and how you work with English speakers? Could you explain some of the differences?
>
> Staff Respondent: One of the differences that I see is that the Hispanic women seem to have more confidence immediately. Because they come to school and I'm one of the few people they can communicate with, they get this confidence, and they will talk to me because I'm the only one they can talk to. And also being familiar with the culture, it really hasn't been a problem helping them to feel comfortable with me. And it probably also has to do with my age. I'm not older than they are, and they don't feel intimidated. And with the English-speaking girls it seems that I have to draw them out a little bit more. Try to be their friend, try to ask them questions, try to draw them out and get them to talk to me. Whereas most of the Hispanic women will just open up and talk, the English-speaking girls seem to need to be more drawn out.
>
> Interviewer: What changes have you seen in the women of Even Start?
>
> Staff Respondent: Well, I've noticed that when the majority of them join Even Start they seem to be depressed and just need a friend sometime. And then within

a couple of months they seem much happier, more outgoing, more willing to participate in activities that the teachers provide. I've seen some that stay at home and watch their children all day long open up and realize they are extending more into the world. Basically, within a couple of months, even weeks, they are out there and having a good time."

Discussion

The most interesting items to emerge from the analysis of the transcripts are the cultural differences between the Hispanic and Anglo participants and the Hispanic participants and the staff, particularly concerning the issue of a full-time interpreter. The staff are seemingly confident that 'making' the Hispanic participants communicate without an interpreter would help them learn English faster. For the Hispanic students, their need for a full-time interpreter is a result of their desire to perform well in the class by completely understanding the instructions. From comments about the differences in educational methods used in their native countries and the United States, it seems they are used to a stricter atmosphere and place a greater importance upon completing an activity correctly the first time. They also seem to have a great respect for their teachers which may initially interfere with an honest display of need from the participants. This corresponds to the staff comment about wanting the students to be more specific about the problems or questions they are having. During the debriefing, the Hispanic participants mentioned a hesitancy to be recorded for fear of misspeaking themselves, not in English but in Spanish. Correct grammatical usage seems to be of greater value to their culture than currently in the United States. This nervousness about being taped crossed cultural boundaries. It was suggested by a participant that perhaps some of the

families of the Anglo participants did not want to answer questions on tape because of sensitivity about their mountain accents. This cross-cultural common ground between the participants was a great discovery to them, and led to the suggestion of talking about nervousness and fear of being recorded during the training.

Other issues mentioned during the debriefing included the director's comment that she had initially doubted that the pilot would actually uncover program needs as in other methods of evaluation. She found that the questions were thought provoking and led her take action in areas in which she had initially hesitated, such as allowing the participants to utilize the computers more often. The interviewing caused not only the interviewers to utilize higher-order thinking skills, but the one being questioned as well. Both the participants and staff felt that it helped them to get to know one another somewhat better, but that if the process were longer, perhaps over the entire year, a much greater understanding could be achieved. The Hispanic participants wanted to continue utilizing the methodology for continual self-evaluation of their English language acquisition; they wanted the tapes critiqued by the English participants to correct their pronunciation and grammar.

Conclusion

As participant observation, the pilot study was successful in capturing cultural identities and many aspects of the program from the viewpoints of staff and participants. As evaluation research, the results were as rich and of greater breadth than the results of a typical focus group, and encompassed Kurz's (1983) list: (a) how programs actually

operate at the local level, (b) how a program has been implemented, (c) how individuals feel about a program, and (d) how individuals have been changed by a program.

Suggested changes include utilizing the process yearlong, thereby enabling participants more practice at question writing, interviewing, and being interviewed. The tapes could then not only be used as program evaluation but as continuous self-evaluation by the participants themselves as their confidence increases. Issues uncovered may be addressed by staff in open dialogue with participants as they occur, increasing mutual understanding and encouraging staff-participant interaction. Increased interaction via interviewing between Spanish speaking and English speaking participants, participants and staff, and participants with each other would also likely increase feelings of community and collaboration.

As this pilot study is replicated in other settings, other suggestions and improvements will be made regarding the methodology, increasing its use as both an evaluation tool and classroom activity.

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